

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LONDON 14851 01 OF 02 201727Z

53

ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5661

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 14851

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJ: 1976 LIBERAL CONFERENCE

SUMMARY: THE ANNUAL LIBERAL ASSEMBLY WHICH MET SEPTEMBER 14-18 IN LLANDUDNO, WALES WAS NOTEWORTHY IN TWO RESPECTS. DAVID STEEL, ELECTED LEADER THREE MONTHS AGO, FIRMLY ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS BOSS OF THE HABITUALLY RECALCITRANT LIBERAL PARTY. OF PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANCE, TALK OF LIBERAL PARTICIPATION IN A COALITION GOVERNMENT CAME OUT OF THE CLOSET AND RECEIVED SUPPORT FROM THE MAJORITY OF THE 1600 DELEGATES WHO ATTENDED THE CONFERENCE. END SUMMAR

1. IN MANY WAYS THE LLANDUDNO GATHERING WAS TYPICALLY BRITISH LIBERAL, UNCHECKED DEMOCRACY. CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS ON EDUCATION AND HOUSING, CAREFULLY WORKED OUT IN COMMITTEE, WERE FIRST RIDICULED AND THEN KILLED ON THE ASSEMBLY FLOOR. THE ASSEMBLY DISCUSSED THE PLIGHT OF
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PAGE 02 LONDON 14851 01 OF 02 201727Z

GYPSIES IN BRITAIN IN WEARY NOMADIC DETAIL. DELEGATES

DEVOTED THIRTY MINUTES TO A MOCK EPIC ARGUMENT ABOUT WHETHER PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION (PR) SHOULD BE "A" OR "THE" PRINCIPAL POLICY GOAL. "A" ROUTED "THE". IN VOTING AGAINST A PRICES AND INCOMES POLICY, THE ASSEMBLY RIPPED OUT THE CENTRAL PLANK IN THE PARTY'S ECONOMIC PLATFORM, AND DID NOTHING TO REPAIR THE GAP BY WEEK'S END. HOLDING FAST TO THEIR IDEOLOGICAL TRADITION, THE LIBERALS ALSO UNCAUTIOUSLY CALLED FOR AN IMMEDIATE AMNESTY FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ALREADY IN THE COUNTRY AND UNRESTRICTED RIGHT OF ENTRY TO THE UK OF ALL THOSE ELIGIBLE TO HOLD UK PASSPORTS. PUT MILDLY, SUCH A RESOLUTION IS NOT A VOTE-GETTER THESE DAYS IN BRITAIN. MORE PREDICTABLY, ONE THREAD WOVE ITS WAY THROUGH EVERY DEBATE. THE BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEM HAS FAILED. MAJOR PARTY GOVERNMENT IS CORRUPT. ELECTORAL REFORM THROUGH PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION WILL RESTORE THE BALANCE IN UK POLITICS. PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION WILL PROVIDE THE CURE FOR THE BRITISH DISEASE.

2. IN THE END, THIS SORT OF CONFERENCE SOUND AND HURRY SIGNIFIED VERY LITTLE. THERE WAS NO SIGN THE COUNTRY CARED A WHIT ABOUT THE PARTY'S RESOLUTIONS. BY THE LAST DAY, THE SAME COULD BE SAID OF MANY FRUSTRATED DELEGATES. ONE ISSUE DID, HOWEVER, GRIP THOSE AT LLANDUDNO. TALK OF COALITION DOMINATED DISCUSSION IN THE CORRIDORS AND IN THE BARS. AFTER YEARS OF PURIST RESISTANCE -- MOST NOTABLY BETWEEN THE 1974 ELECTIONS -- THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT THE LIBERALS ARE NOW MOVING TOWARD THE IDEA OF COALITION GOVERNMENT WITH ONE OF THE MAJOR PARTIES. THERE ARE SEVERAL REASONS FOR THIS SHARP TURN IN LIBERAL STRATEGY.

3. THE JEREMY THORPE AFFAIR AND THE SQUALID PERFORMANCE OF THE LIBERAL MPS DURING THE LEADERSHIP CRISIS HAS PUT THE PARTY ON THE CRITICAL LIST. THE LIBERALS ARE BELOW 10 PERCENT IN THE POLLS. WORSE, LIBERAL CANDIDATES LOST THEIR DEPOSITS IN FOUR OF THE LAST FIVE BY-ELECTIONS. THUS, MANY IN THE PARTY FEAR THAT WITHOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF COALITION, THE PARLIAMENTARY LIBERAL PARTY COULD BE ALL BUT WIPED OUT IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION. THAT

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PAGE 03 LONDON 14851 01 OF 02 201727Z

NIGHTMARE IS ESPECIALLY VIVID WITH SOCIAL DEMOCRAT JIM CALLAGHAN AT NUMBER 10 AND MIDDLE-CLASS TORY VOTERS LIKELY TO RALLY ROUND MAGGIE. THE BAD NEWS DOESN'T END THERE. THE PROTEST VOTERS THAT ONCE ALMOST AUTOMATICALLY WENT LIBERAL NOW CAN AND DO CHOOSE THE SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS, THE WELSH NATIONALISTS, OR EVEN -- PERVERSELY -- THE FASCIST NATIONAL FRONT.

4. THERE ARE ALSO LESS FRIGHTENING REASONS FOR THE
LIBERAL CHANGE OF HEART. THE LOGIC THAT PR WILL INEVITA-
BLY BRING COALITION GOVERNMENT HAS FINALLY PENETRATED THE
DOCTRINAIRE PREJUDICE OF THE PARTY'S RANK AND FILE. HOW
CAN ONE, THE ARGUMENT INCREASINGLY GOES, BE AGAINST
COALITION BEFORE PR AND FOR IT AFTERWARD? MOREOVER,
DAVID STEEL -- THE PARTY'S NEW LEADER -- HAS LONG
WHISPERED COALITION. SO HAS HIS CHIEF RIVAL FOR THE

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PAGE 01 LONDON 14851 02 OF 02 201732Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 14851

LEADERSHIP, JOHN PARDOE. AND FINALLY, THE CONTINUING
PROLIFERATION OF UK POLITICAL PARTIES HAS CONVINCED MANY
LIBERALS THAT NEITHER THE LABOR NOR THE CONSERVATIVE
PARTIES WILL GET A MAJORITY IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION.
THE LIBERALS, THEREFORE, MUST BE READY TO STRIKE A DEAL,
OR ONE OR MORE OF THE OTHER SMALL PARTIES WILL.

5. THE COALITION ISSUE FINALLY BURST ON THE FLOOR OF THE ASSEMBLY DURING ITS FINAL HOUR. STEEL BLUNTLY ESTABLISHED HIS AUTHORITY OVER THE PARTY IN HIS SPEECH WHICH CLOSED THE CONFERENCE. "WE MUST BE CLEAR IN OUR OWN MINDS THAT IF THE POLITICAL CONDITIONS ARE RIGHT...WE SHALL PROBABLY HAVE -- AT LEAST TEMPORARILY -- TO SHARE POWER WITH SOMEONE ELSE TO BRING ABOUT THE CHANGES WE SEEK...WE MUST BE BOLD ENOUGH TO DEPLOY THE COALITION CASE POSITIVELY". HE WAS NOT, HE SAID, PREPARED TO LEAD
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PAGE 02 LONDON 14851 02 OF 02 201732Z

A DEBATING SOCIETY. THE YOUNG LIBERALS AND A FEW OTHERS HOWLED NO. BUT THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE 1600 DELEGATES ROSE AND CHANTED YES, YES, YES. THEY SHOWED HOW FAR THE PARTY HAS COME ON COALITION SINCE 1974.

6. THE PROBLEM FOR THE LIBERALS IS THAT THE COUNTRY AT LARGE DOESN'T MUCH CARE WHAT THE PARTY THINKS ABOUT COALITION. NOBODY IS KNOCKING ON THEIR DOOR. THE BRITISH ELECTORATE IS UNSURPRISINGLY PREOCCUPIED WITH TAKE-HOME PAY AND LUNCH-PAIL ECONOMICS. A MILLION AND A HALF OF THEM ARE NOT WORKING AT ALL. THUS, THE LIBERALS CATECHISM OF PR AND NOW TO A LESSER DEGREE COALITION SEEMS INWARD-LOOKING AND SELF-SERVING, AS WELL AS PERIPHERAL TO THE CENTRAL CONCERNS OF THE BRITISH VOTER. NEVERTHELESS, A FULL BLOODED AFFIRMATION OF LIBERAL WILLINGNESS AT THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION TO ENTER A COALITION COULD CONVINCE SOME HERE THAT A VOTE FOR THE LIBERALS WAS NOT A VOTE WASTED. MOREOVER, THE ASSEMBLY AND STEEL'S SPEECH DID MUCH TO DISSIPATE THE GLOOM THAT HAS HUNG OVER THE PARTY SINCE OCTOBER 1974.

7. THE LIBERALS WERE RE-CHARGED AT LLANDUDNO BY THEIR NEW LEADER. YET HISTORY MAY NOT BE ON THEIR SIDE. THE CONSUMMATE IRONY OF THE LAST WEEK MAY BE THAT WHEN AND IF COALITION GOVERNMENT COMES AGAIN TO BRITAIN, IT WILL BE THE SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS WITH AS MANY AS 30 SEATS WHO WILL HOLD THE BALANCE OF POWER AND NOT THE LIBERALS WITH AS FEW AS THREE.

ARMSTRONG

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